DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 368 EC 200 457

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TITLE Learning Disabled Adolescents' Use of Pragmatic Functions and Code-Switching.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (Detroit, MI, November 21-24, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comprehension; Expressive Language; High Schools; *Interpersonal Competence; *Learning Disabilities; *Pragmatics; *Social Cognition

ABSTRACT

The study examined whether a difference existed between 10 learning disabled (LD) and 10 normally achieving (NA) high school students in terms of comprehension and production or use of pragmatic skills. The skills examined were pragmatic function (i.e., an utterance spoken in context with specific intent), and code-switching (i.e., modification of one's communicative style according to the attributes of the listener). Subjects listened to audiotapes of a peer model portraying nine speaking situations which involved three pragmatic functions (heuristic, interactional, and instrumental) spoken to three audiences (authority figure, peer, and subordinate). After completing a written comprehension task, each subject role played the nine speaking situations. Audiotapes were evaluated according to how accurately each response conveyed the communicative intent when speaking to the intended audience. Analysis of results indicated that a significant difference did not exist between LD and NA subjects' ability to comprehend the pragmatic skills used in the social situations. Both groups correctly identified the intended audience and intent in seven of the nine speaking situations. However, LD subjects were significantly poorer in using the pragmatic skills in social situations than their NA peers. A significant correlation between comprehension and production or use of pragmatic skills did not exist. A list of definitions, a matrix of the nine speaking situations, and lists of identification measures, programs and materials conclude the document. References are provided. (CL)

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LEARNING DISABLED ADOLESCENTS' USE OF PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS AND CODE-SWITCHING

by

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ASHA Annual Convention
Detroit, Michigan
November 21, 1986

EC200457

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Language CONTENT & FORM

Studies investigating CONTENT and FORM in LD adolescent language have revealed deficits in comprehension and production skills.

Comprehension

---Fayne (1981): Comprehension of anaphoric pronouns

---Wiig & Roach (1975): Recall of semantically and syntactically varied sentences.

---Wiig & Semel (1974b, 1975, 1976): Comprehension of linguistic concepts, word retrieval, and comprehension of complex sentence structure.

Production

---Simms & Crump (1983): Production of morphological and syntactic structures.

---Wiig & Semel (1975, 1976): Word finding deficits, production of convergent and divergent semantic units, and repetition of complex sentence structures.

Language USE

Studies that support social perception deficits in the LD population are as follows:

---Wiig & Harris (1973)

---Bachara (1976)

---Budrick (1976)

---Bryan (1977)

---Pucket (1980)

---Maheady (1981)

One study that does not support social perception deficits in the LD population is by Thomas (1979).

Studies with mixed findings, depending upon the stimuli used are as follows:

---Maitland (1977)

---Maheady (1981)

---Bruno (1981)

Several authors have documented LD adolescents as exhibiting poor pragmatic or social skills:

---Alley & Deshler (1983)

---Schumaker & Hazel (1984)

---Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, & Sheldon (1982)

---Schumaker, Hazel, Sherman, & Sheldon (1982)

Studies that have attempted to isolate those features in a social interaction which LD adolescents are deficient have mixed findings:

---Banikowski (1981): There were no differences between LD and NA adolescents' cognitive-socialization strategies.

---Buell (1983): There were differences between LD and NA adolescents in the quantity of polite forms of request they produced.

---Tomosada (1983): There were no differences between LD and NA adolescents on five oral language measures.

---Fullowka (1983): There were differences in the proportion of pragmatic functions used by LD adolescents when speaking to an adult versus a peer.

SUMMARY

Rationale: 1) To determine if a difference exists between Learning Disabled (LD) and Normal Achieving (NA) adolescents' comprehension and production, or use, of pragmatic skills. 2) To determine if a relationship exists between comprehension and production, or use, of pragmatic skills.

Research Questions: The three research questions are:

1. Do LD and NA adolescents differ in their ability to comprehend the pragmatic skills of a social situation?
2. Do LD and NA adolescents differ in their ability to produce, or use pragmatic skills in a social situation?
3. Does a relationship exist between comprehension and production, or use, of pragmatic skills?

Methodology

Stimuli: The two pragmatic skills examined in this study were pragmatic functions and code-switching. The stimuli consisted of nine speaking situations. The situations involved three pragmatic functions- heuristic, interactional, and instrumental- spoken to three audiences- authority figure, peer, and subordinate.

Subjects: The subjects were randomly selected from one high school in Topeka, Kansas.

Experimental Group: It consisted of ten LD students in grades 9-12. There were seven males and three females, ranging in age from 15-2 to 19-0, with a mean age of 16-11 years.

Control Group: It consisted of ten NA students in grades 9-12. There were four males and six females, ranging in age from 15-0 to 18-4 years, with a mean age of 16-1 years.

Procedure: The study consisted of a comprehension and production task, involving the same speaking situations.

Comprehension Task: The subjects listened to a prerecorded audiotape of a peer model portraying the nine speaking situations. After listening to each situation, the subjects recorded on a response sheet to whom the message was spoken and the intent of the message.

Production Task: After completing the comprehension task, each subject individually role-played the nine speaking situations. Their responses were recorded on an audiotape. The responses were played back for a panel of four judges. The subjects were rated according to how accurately each respone conveyed the communicative intent (e.g. the use of the pragmatic function) when speaking to the intended audience. A seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "very inaccurate" to "very accurate" was utilized to rate the responses.

Results

Research Question #1: A t-test of mean scores revealed that a significant difference did not exist between LD and NA adolescents' ability to comprehend the pragmatic skills used in the social situations. Both groups correctly identified the intended audience and intent in seven of the nine speaking situations.

Research Question #2: A t-test of mean scores revealed that a significant difference did exist between LD and NA adolescents' ability to produce, or use, the pragmatic skills in a social situation. The LD students were significantly poorer than their NA peers at using the pragmatic skills in the social situations. However, examination of the individual mean scores revealed that some LD students received equal to or superior production scores.

Research Question #3: A Pearson product-moment correlation revealed that a significant correlation did not exist between comprehension and production, or use, of pragmatic skills?

Discussion: Both groups displayed adequate comprehension of the pragmatic skills used in the social situations. Stated another way, both LD and NA adolescents displayed adequate social perception skills. As a group, the LD adolescents produced or used the pragmatic skills significantly poorer than their NA peers. However, individual mean scores revealed some of the LD students to have superior social skills than their NA peers. The difference in individual scores highlights the notion that the LD population is a heterogenous group. Finally, there was no correlation between comprehension and production, or use, of the pragmatic skills. In other words, the LD and NA adolescents' social perception skills did not correlate with their ability to use the pragmatic skills in the social situations.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Learning Disability: A two or more grade level discrepancy between chronological age and achievement level in one or more of the following areas: reading, math, or written language, which includes grammar and spelling.

Pragmatic Skills or Social Skills: The rules governing language use. Pragmatic skills may be composed of the following skills: cognitive linguistic skills, problem-solving skills, and overt social behaviors, which may be verbal or non-verbal.

Pragmatic Function: An utterance, spoken in context, with a specified intent. It is a component of pragmatic skills.

Code-Switching: Another component of pragmatic skills, code-switching is modifying one's communication style according to the attributes of the listener. These attributes may include the listener's age, sex, and status.

Social Perception: The ability to identify, recognize, and interpret the meaning and significance of the behavior of others. It may be considered another component of pragmatic skills.

Matrix of the Nine Speaking Situations

	Heuristic	Interactional	Instrumental
Authority Figure	1	2	3
Peer	4	5	6
Subordinate	7	8	9

Situation #1: Seeking information from an authority figure

Situation #2: Starting a conversation with an authority figure

Situation #3: Asking a favor from an authority figure

Situation #4: Seeking information from a peer

Situation #5: Starting a conversation with a peer

Situation #6: Asking a favor from a peer

Situation #7: Seeking information from a subordinate

Situation #8: Starting a conversation with a subordinate

Situation #9: Asking a favor from a subordinate

COMPONENTS OF PRAGMATIC SKILLS

---Cognitive Linguistic Skills: long-term memory, comprehension and expression of complex linguistic structures, word association, verbal analogies, word finding, and convergent and divergent reasoning.

---Problem-Solving Skills: discriminating social cues, identifying social cues, role-taking skills, predicting consequences for actions, negotiating, choosing socially acceptable behavior.

---Overt Social Skills: non-verbal skills (body posture and facial expressions) and verbal skills (initiating conversation, speaking to different audiences, answering and asking questions, etc.).

IDENTIFICATION OF PRAGMATIC SKILLS

---Standardized Pragmatic Tests

1. Let's Talk Inventory
2. ASSET Program
3. Interpersonal Language Skills Assessment(ILSA)
4. Test of Language Competence

---Standardized Language Tests

1. Clinical Evaluation of Language Functions(CELF)
2. Test of Adolescent Language(TOAL)
3. Fullerton Language Test for Adolescents

---Informal Probes

1. Problem-Solving Skills
2. Nonverbal Communication(videotape)

---Parent and Teacher Checklists

1. Interaction with Peers
2. Interaction with Adults

REMEDIATION PROGRAMS AND MATERIALS

---Programs

1. Let's Talk Program Intermediate Level
2. ASSET Program

---Materials

1. Language Remediation and Expansion
2. Situational Language Use: A Pragmatic Approach to Problem-Solving Skills
3. The Language of Humor
4. Manual of Exercises for Expressive Reasoning (MEER)
5. Resource of Activities for Peer Pragmatics (RAPP)

---Resources for Developing a LD Adolescent Language Program

1. Language Assessment and Intervention for the Learning Disabled by E. H. Wiig and E. Semel
2. Communication Skills and Classroom Success: Therapy Methodologies for Language-Learning Disabled Students by C. S. Simon
3. "Neglected Language-Disordered Adolescents: A Delivery Model" by N. L. McKinnley and V. Lord-Larson
4. "Speech-Language-Hearing Services in the Public Schools---A Class Act", ASHA Magazine
5. "Social Skills Curricula for Mildly Handicapped Adolescents: A Review" by J. B. Schumaker, C. Pederson, J. S. Hazel, and E. Meyen
6. "Social Skills Assessment and Training for the Learning Disabled: Who's on First and What's on Second? Part I and II" by J. B. Schumaker and J. S. Hazel

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